

Is Virtual Reality Helping with People's Grief or Crossing a Spiritual Line?

Read time: 4 minutes 46 seconds

Death is an inevitability of life in a sin-cursed world. Limited in its life cycle, the human body will eventually die.

Humanity has attempted to subvert this occurrence throughout the millennia and bypass the grief that comes with losing a loved one.

Now, technology companies are trying to utilize artificial intelligence and virtual reality to simulate and program an avatar based on people's loved ones who have died.

As reported by "The Washington Post," a team from South Korea created a documentary about a mother visiting a digital version of her daughter.

Titled, "Meeting You," the documentary is focused on a mother, Jang Ji-Sun, whose daughter died suddenly from an incurable disease at the age of 7. Her deepest regret, due to the suddenness of her daughter's death, was that she never got to say goodbye.

In the documentary, the production team re-created her daughter with a digital version that Sun could interact with using a VR headset.

In the VR world, a little girl, Na-yeon, ran to Jang, calling out to her, "Mom!"

Even with the digital limitations of VR, Jang burst into tears and said to the digital image of her daughter, "Mom missed you so much, Na-yeon."

"I was worried how the mother would react," said producer Kim Jong-woo. "'No matter how hard we tried to make the character similar, she still can tell the difference. But she said she was happy to see even the slight reflection of Na-yeon."

This virtual reunion with the dead offers a multitude of questions across a spectrum of topics. Are simulations like this ethical? Will it cause more long-term damage than the short-term benefits offer? Can someone ever get over the death of a loved one if they continue their grief in a digital world?

All of these questions and more are already being asked by experts such as Sherman Lee, an associate professor of psychology at Christopher Newport University and director of the Pandemic Grief Project.

"If you're asking me, is watching videos of your deceased spouse every night a helpful thing to do, instead of re-engaging the world again and spending that time with friends and family?" Lee said. "No, I don't think it's helpful. But that said, would it be helpful to smash all of the videos and lock them up in a room? That's going to make the grieving process worse."

The Bible addresses this type of situation very well. In both Old and New Testaments, Scripture often discusses grief and loss. But, as with all emotions and situations, these have a season, as Ecclesiastes 3 discusses.

God knew humans would endure pain such as Jang's. The grief of losing a loved one can be overpowering for many, and they look for an outlet to mourn the loss. But just as there are healthy and constructive outlets for grief, there are unhealthy and destructive outlets as well.

Early in the Bible, God warns the Israelites against consorting with mediums and becoming involved in necromancy. He despises this practice and find it abominable; it is a

gross offense to Him (Lev. 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:10-12; Isa. 8:19).

To show how much the Lord detests this practice, one only has to look at the tragic story of Israel's first king, Saul.

After the prophet Samuel died, Saul had a crisis of the heart. He went to war against the Philistine army and was fearful of the enemy. When the Lord did not answer his initial inquiries, Saul sought out a medium to summon Samuel's spirit.

This event revealed that the Lord had departed from Saul and became his enemy. So great was this offense to the Lord that when Saul's death is noted in 1 Chronicles 10, Scripture says the Lord had him killed for not obeying His command and for consulting with a medium (v. 13).

Now, the same practice is being developed within a digital world.

Applications such as "Dadbot," developed by James Vlahos, take emails, texts, voice recordings and memories such as photos of the person and allow users to interact with them.

Vlahos lost his father to lung cancer and, on occasion, uses the program he developed to "chat" with his father's voice when he misses him.

All the reasons the people who have developed and used these AI and VR methods of reconnecting with loved ones come from a place of grief and hurt. No one can blame them for missing the people who were important to them in life.

But is a spiritual line being crossed in all of this? Are these actions the same reasons people would associate with mediums and necromancers in ages past?

As the future brings with it a blurred line between reality and fiction, Christians must be able to discern actions that are pleasing to God from those that are not. Even if they are

committed unintentionally and with good intentions, God takes them very seriously, and believers should too.

The Bible may not specifically address the ramifications of AI and VR usage, but the spirit and intent of how such tools are used is addressed. Grief can take hold of a person's spirit and not let go. But we have a Father in heaven who is there for those who are grieving, and they are able to lay that hurt down at His altar and give their pain to Him. Only there will they find true healing in His great love and experience real joy in His presence (Ps. 16:11). {eoa}

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